



MONTANA FWP

2020 Montana State Parks Q3 Visitation Update

Issued October 2020

Montana State Parks is on track to have a record-setting year when looking at visitation estimates for the first nine months of 2020.

Key observations in looking at visitation data for the nine months of 2020 include:

- It is estimated there have been **3.0** million visitors between January and September of 2020. This represents a **24.4%** increase compared with the same time period last year and is a new high for the state park system.
- 80% of state parks saw visitation increases during the first nine months of 2020 compared with the same time period last year.
- There were **eight** parks (listed below) whose estimated year to date visitation has exceeded 100,000. By comparison, at this point last year there were **six**.

State Park	2020 YTD Visitation	2019 YTD Visitation
Flathead Lake (all units)	439,298	329,012
Cooney Reservoir	330,730	262,523
Giant Springs	312,655	313,246
Lake Elmo	206,091	163,890
Thompson Chain of Lakes	155,483	109,127
Spring Meadow	146,350	109,152
Lone Pine	111,672	95,003
Makoshika	106,063	72,969

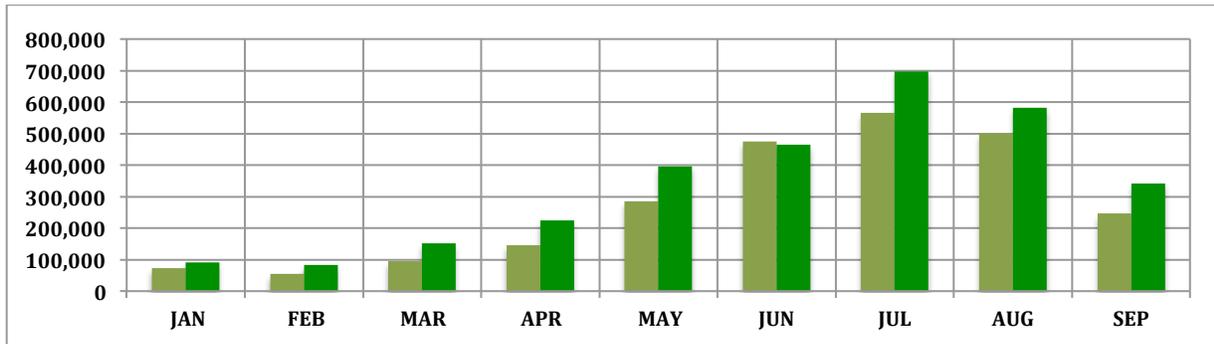
- Two state parks played host to **over 100,000 visitors during a single month** this year - Flathead Lake, in both July and August, and Cooney Reservoir, in August.
- Nine state parks, conversely, have seen a decline in 2020 visitation compared with last year. Five of the nine are sites that operate visitor centers. They include First Peoples Buffalo Jump, Chief Plenty Coups, Pictograph Cave, and Lewis & Clark Caverns.

Just as in other places around the world, COVID-19 has promulgated a surge outdoors and certainly it has had enduring impacts on Montana's state park system and staff. Notably, there were some especially sharp upward spikes in visitation at sites that offered camping and water-based recreation. Such growth, unlike in other years occurred both at parks co-located to larger cities as well as more remote or rural sites. By contrast, there were declines in visitation at a small handful of state parks. These were likely attributable to restrictions on travel, social gatherings, and group activities. There were also some COVID-related closures of visitor centers, as well as Bannack State Park, in its entirety, earlier in the year. All park and amenity closures were temporary.

The forthcoming summary has been developed utilizing reported numbers by park managers for 2019 and 2020. Notes about the system's visitation efforts and upcoming changes can be found at the end of this document.

How has state park visitation changed between 2019 and 2020?

It is estimated there have been **3.0** million visitors between January and September of 2020. This represents a **24.4%** increase compared with the same time period last year. Notably, it represents a new high for Montana's state park system. The growth trend is consistent with other park system visitation estimates observed across the country for 2020. The below table depicts overall year to date visitation for 2019 and 2020.



	<u>JAN</u>	<u>FEB</u>	<u>MAR</u>	<u>APR</u>	<u>MAY</u>	<u>JUN</u>	<u>MIDYEAR</u>
2019	72,560	53,836	94,550	146,389	283,870	473,821	1,125,026
2020	92,121	83,506	151,911	224,062	396,508	464,823	1,412,931
% Change	27.0%	55.1%	60.7%	53.1%	39.7%	-1.9%	25.6%
	<u>JUL</u>	<u>AUG</u>	<u>SEP</u>	<u>OCT</u>	<u>NOV</u>	<u>DEC</u>	<u>YTD</u>
2019	566,955	500,949	247,496				2,440,426
2020	698,116	582,160	342,403				3,035,610
% Change	23.1%	16.2%	38.3%				24.4%

* Please note that since the issuance of the 2020 midyear update, some minor changes to improve accuracy were made to 2019 estimates.

What were the top 10 most visited parks for 2020?

The top ten most visited parks for 2020 are below. A complete list can be found at the end of this report. The dispersion of these parks across administrative regions demonstrates that growth has occurred across the state.

REGION	PARK	YTD 2020
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	439,298
5	Cooney	330,730
4	Giant Springs	312,655
5	Lake Elmo	206,091
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	155,483
4	Spring Meadow	146,350
1	Lone Pine	111,672
6/7	Makoshika	106,063
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	85,421
2	Placid Lake	84,922

How many state parks have experienced visitation growth?

Year to date estimates indicate that visitation at eight out 10 state parks increased in 2020. Some have experienced explosive growth this year, even with the absence or sharp decline in school field trips, public programs, and other group activities that would normatively take place. The below table provides a list of how visitation estimates have changed at each state park.

REGION	PARK	2019	2020	% Change
4	Tower Rock	10,008	23,862	138.4%
2	Milltown	32,020	65,773	105.4%
4	Ackley Lake	30,433	58,947	93.7%
6/7	Medicine Rocks	14,574	24,619	68.9%
2	Frenchtown Pond	46,076	76,151	65.3%
6/7	Pirogue Island	3,159	5,150	63.0%
4	Black Sandy	39,125	62,352	59.4%
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	12,445	18,665	50.0%
1	Lake Mary Ronan	21,614	32,091	48.5%
6/7	Makoshika	72,969	106,063	45.4%
4	Sluice Boxes	19,792	28,538	44.2%
2	Salmon Lake	48,966	69,980	42.9%
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	109,127	155,483	42.5%
2	Painted Rocks	11,565	16,360	41.5%
1	Les Mason	33,294	46,195	38.7%
2	Placid Lake	62,447	84,922	36.0%
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	63,324	85,421	34.9%
4	Spring Meadow	109,152	146,350	34.1%
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	329,012	439,298	33.5%
2	Beavertail Hill	21,095	27,990	32.7%
2	Council Grove	29,176	37,826	29.6%
3	Missouri Headwaters	44,907	58,109	29.4%
6/7	Brush Lake	8,151	10,450	28.2%
1	Thompson Falls	15,081	19,060	26.4%
5	Cooney	262,523	330,730	26.0%
5	Lake Elmo	163,890	206,091	25.7%
1	Logan	28,018	33,455	19.4%
1	Whitefish	66,663	79,074	18.6%
1	Lone Pine	95,003	111,672	17.5%
2	Travelers' Rest	33,377	38,432	15.1%
2	Fort Owen	3,834	4,310	12.4%
3	Lost Creek	13,872	15,491	11.7%
5	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	10,946	7.3%
4	Smith River	6,051	6,248	3.3%
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	13,389	13,477	0.7%
4	Giant Springs	313,246	312,655	-0.2%
3	Clark's Lookout	5,077	4,999	-1.5%
6/7	Hell Creek	31,823	31,069	-2.4%
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	15,023	13,287	-11.6%

3	Bannack	39,151	32,377	-17.3%
5	Chief Plenty Coups	13,604	11,012	-19.1%
5	Pictograph Cave	48,479	38,976	-19.6%
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	5,790	4,297	-25.8%
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	83,895	37,357	-55.5%

**Flathead Lake units (Region 1)*

Park	2019	2020	% Change
FL-Finley Point	28,244	45,472	61.0%
FL-West Shore	26,074	40,985	57.2%
FL-Big Arm	47,471	63,804	34.4%
FL-Wayfarers	179,774	237,756	32.3%
FL-Yellow Bay	23,556	30,462	29.3%
FL-Wild Horse Island	23,893	20,819	-12.9%

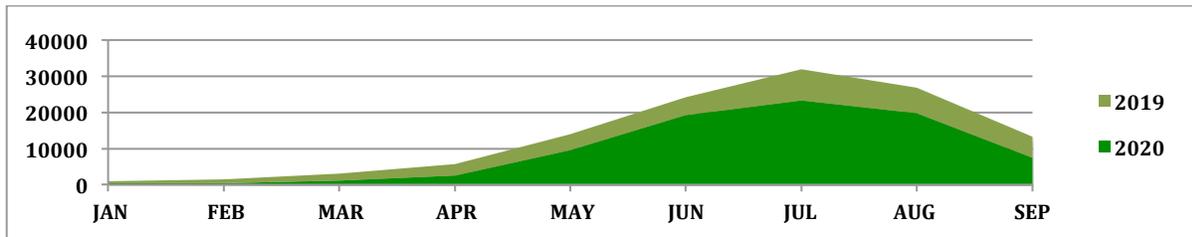
A look into the regions

A closer look at visitation for each state park administrative region reveals more information about what is occurring.

To begin, it is interesting to look at each region's total visitation estimates for the year thus far. In comparing this year's estimates with last year's, five out of the six regions experienced overall growth, with some being quite significant. As noted further in this report, in **Regions 1 and 2**, every state park experienced an increase in 2020.

Region	2019	2020	% Change
1	697,812	916,328	31.3%
2	288,556	421,744	46.2%
3	212,736	180,475	-15.2%
4	542,830	652,239	20.2%
5	498,702	597,755	19.9%
6/7	199,790	267,069	33.7%
	2,440,426	3,035,610	24.4%

The only region that experienced a decline in overall visitation is **Region 3**. In looking at this more closely, it is important to note the significant decline in visitation at Lewis and Clark Caverns. In that park alone, year to date visitation decreased by **55.5%** when comparing 2019 and 2020. So what happened? With COVID-19 precautions in place, tours were heavily scaled back to protect staff, seasonal workers, volunteers and the public, not to mention the natural features of the park itself. The chart below depicts the difference in year to date visitation at the park this year as compared with last year.



It is also interesting to see what changes have occurred to the share of statewide visitation each administrative region experienced. Clearly there are varying numbers of parks within in each region, and of course each park's visitation and ability to accommodate visitors is distinct. For 2020 thus far, Region 1 grew the most, followed by Region 2. Meanwhile, Regions 4 and 5 grew at the same pace while Regions 6 and 7 grew just slightly. In contrast, Region 3 experienced a slight dip in its share.

Region	# State Parks	2019 proportion	2020 proportion	Year to year change
1	8	23.0%	30.2%	7.2%
2	9	9.5%	13.9%	4.4%
3	7	7.3%	5.9%	-1.4%
4	8	17.9%	21.5%	3.6%
5	5	16.1%	19.7%	3.6%
6/7	7	6.6%	8.8%	2.2%

2020 REGIONAL SUMMARIES (January-September)

What follows is a region-by-region look at the changes in visitation between January and September for 2020 compared with last year during the same time period.

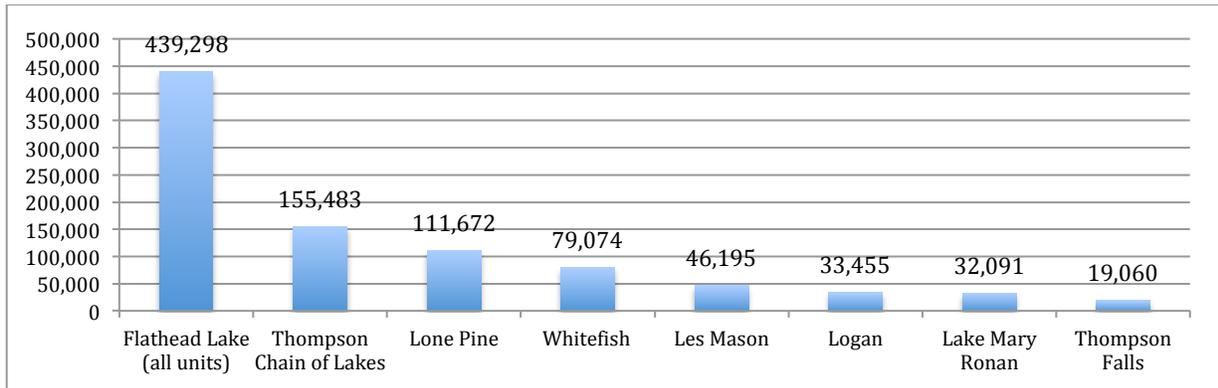
A more detailed look at month-to-month data for each park is available upon request.

REGION 1

Region 1 experienced a **31.3%** increase in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. It is one of two regions that saw an increase at all sites. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **30.2%** of statewide visitation. Three of the top seven most visited parks are in Region 1, headquartered in Kalispell.

- The **Flathead Lake** units all experienced a substantial increase in visitation in 2020 when compared with last year with the exception of Wild Horse Island. Just as in 2019, it was the state's most visited park when looking at year to date visitation estimates. It experienced an overall 33.5% rise in visitors in 2020 compared with 2019.
- At an increase of 48.5%, **Lake Mary Ronan** experienced the largest jump in visitation in 2020 in the region compared with 2019.
- Another key driver for the region continued to be the **Thompson Chain of Lakes**, whose visitation grew an estimated 42.5% during the reporting period. It was the state's fifth most visited park.
- Another heavily used park in 2020 was **Lone Pine**, which at an estimated 111,672 visitors was the state's seventh most visited park.
- **Les Mason's** visitation grew by 38.7% over last year's estimates.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



* Includes Flathead Lake being counted as one park, comprised of 6 units

Region 1 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Lake Mary Ronan	21,614	32,091	48.5%
Thompson Chain of Lakes	109,127	155,483	42.5%
Les Mason	33,294	46,195	38.7%
Flathead Lake (all units)	329,012	439,298	33.5%
Thompson Falls	15,081	19,060	26.4%
Logan	28,018	33,455	19.4%
Whitefish	66,663	79,074	18.6%
Lone Pine	95,003	111,672	17.5%
Total Region 1	697,812	916,328	31.3%

It is also interesting to observe changes at the individual Flathead Lake units, as depicted below.

Flathead Lake Units	2019	2020	% Change
Big Arm	47,471	63,804	34.4%
Finley Point	28,244	45,472	61.0%
Wayfarers	179,774	237,756	32.3%
West Shore	26,074	40,985	57.2%
Wild Horse Island	23,893	20,819	-12.9%
Yellow Bay	23,556	30,462	29.3%
	329,012	439,298	33.5%

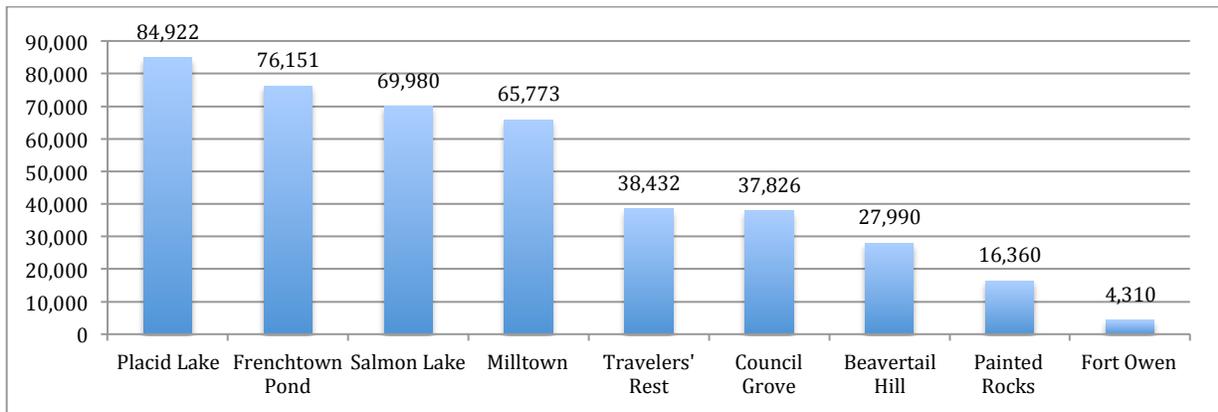
NOTE: Visitation data is not collected at the North Shore unit.

REGION 2

Region 2 experienced a **46.2%** increase in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. This is the largest increase of any of the state parks' administrative regions. It is also one of two regions that saw an increase at all sites. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **13.9%** of statewide visitation. Region 2 is headquartered in Missoula.

- **Placid Lake** was the tenth most visited park in the state during the reporting period, with an estimated 84,922 visitors.
- Not far behind were **Frenchtown Pond, Salmon Lake, and Milltown** with an estimated 76,151, 69,980 and 65,773 visitors.
- It stands to note that **Milltown**, the state's newest park, also saw an increase of 105.4% when comparing estimates from 2020 to 2019. This is the second largest increase for all parks in the system. Similarly, **Frenchtown Pond** saw a 65.3% increase during this time. It represents the state's fifth largest increase when looking at year to date visitation.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



Region 2 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Milltown	32,020	65,773	105.4%
Frenchtown Pond	46,076	76,151	65.3%
Salmon Lake	48,966	69,980	42.9%
Painted Rocks	11,565	16,360	41.5%
Placid Lake	62,447	84,922	36.0%
Beavertail Hill	21,095	27,990	32.7%
Council Grove	29,176	37,826	29.6%
Travelers' Rest	33,377	38,432	15.1%
Fort Owen	3,834	4,310	12.4%
	288,556	421,744	46.2%

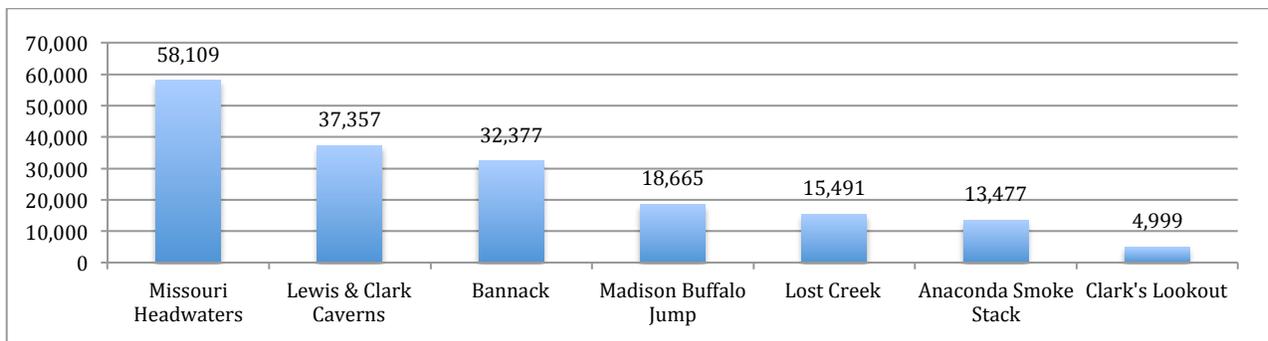
NOTE: Visitation data at Fish Creek was not reported in 2020.

REGION 3

Region 3 experienced a **15.2%** decrease in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **5.9%** of statewide visitation. Headquartered in Bozeman, Region 3 was the only administrative region that experienced a decline in overall visitation.

- Due to safety concerns related to COVID-19, tours at **Lewis and Clark Caverns** have been limited this season, in turn causing a 55.5% decline in year to date visitation.
- Similarly, **Bannack** was one of just two state parks that were temporarily closed to the public due to COVID-19. Its visitation was also impacted heavily by the decline in school field trips and organized groups that often frequent the park.
- On the bright side, visitation at **Madison Buffalo** jumped 50.0% as compared with last year. This was the eighth largest increase for all state parks.
- Estimates for **Missouri Headwaters**, the region's most visited park, indicate that there was a 29.4% increase this year over last year.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



Region 3 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Madison Buffalo Jump	12,445	18,665	50.0%
Missouri Headwaters	44,907	58,109	29.4%
Lost Creek	13,872	15,491	11.7%
Anaconda Smoke Stack	13,389	13,477	0.7%
Clark's Lookout	5,077	4,999	-1.5%
Bannack	39,151	32,377	-17.3%
Lewis & Clark Caverns	83,895	37,357	-55.5%
	212,736	180,475	-15.2%

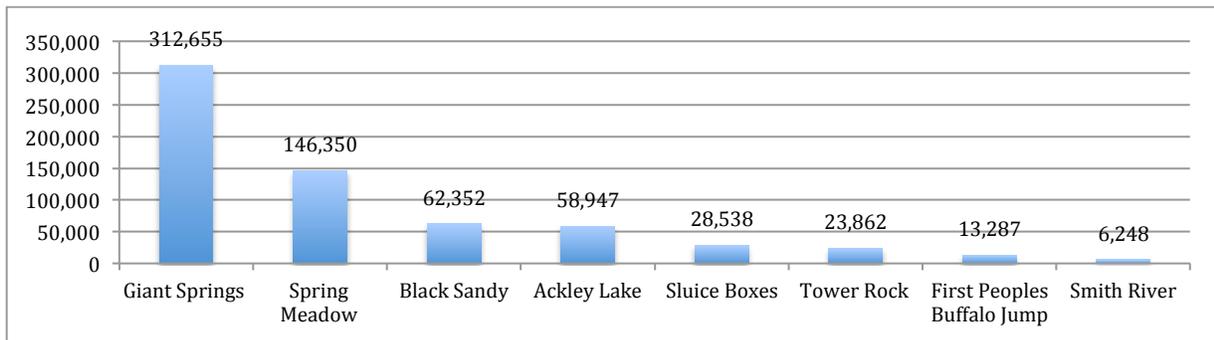
NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Beaverhead Rock or Granite Ghost Town. Additionally, visitation data was not collected for Clark's Lookout during the months of January thru April in 2019 and 2020.

REGION 4

Region 4 experienced a **20.2%** increase in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **21.5%** of statewide visitation. Two of the top six most visited parks are in Region 4, headquartered in Great Falls.

- **Giant Springs** was the third most visited park in the state in thus far, with an estimated 312,655 visitors, which was similar to 2019 trends.
- With **Spring Meadow**'s proximity to Helena, it experienced a 34.1% increase in visitation, becoming the state's sixth most visited park at an estimated 146,350 visitors.
- **Ackley Lake** experienced an estimated 93.7% increase during the reporting period, representing the state's third largest increase over last year.
- **Black Sandy**, saw a jump of 59.4% over 2019, which constitutes the state's seventh largest increase.
- **Sluice Boxes**, which is a relatively short drive from Great Falls, has continued in its upward trajectory increasing an estimated 44.2% over last year's figures.
- Interestingly there was a significant spike at **Tower Rock** in 2020.
- Last, there was an 11.6% decline in visitation between 2020 and 2019 at **First Peoples' Buffalo Jump**, a park that normally offers a wealth of public programs and educational opportunities.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Elkhorn and for the Smith River during the months of January thru March.

Region 4 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

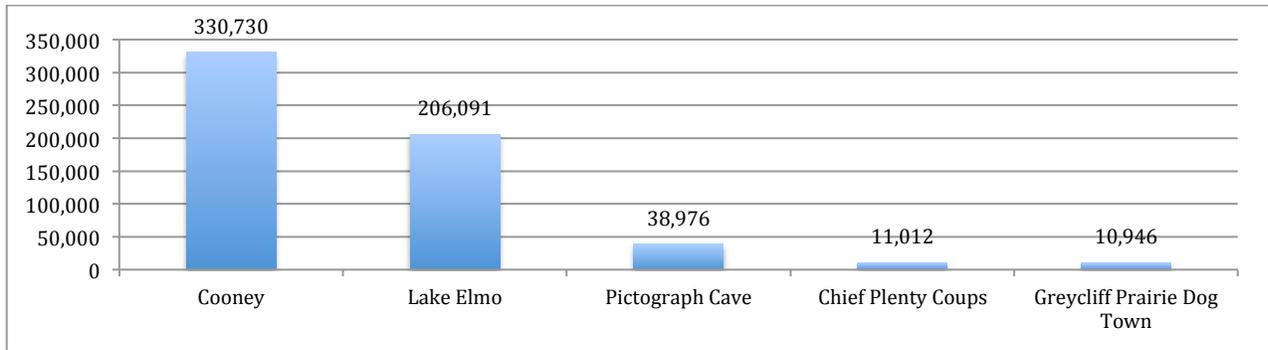
State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Tower Rock	10,008	23,862	138.4%
Ackley Lake	30,433	58,947	93.7%
Black Sandy	39,125	62,352	59.4%
Sluice Boxes	19,792	28,538	44.2%
Spring Meadow	109,152	146,350	34.1%
Smith River	6,051	6,248	3.3%
Giant Springs	313,246	312,655	-0.2%
First Peoples Buffalo Jump	15,023	13,287	-11.6%
	542,830	652,239	20.2%

REGION 5

Region 5 experienced a **19.9%** increase in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **19.7%** of statewide visitation. Two of the top four most visited parks are in Region 5, headquartered in Billings.

- **Cooney Reservoir** had a record-breaking year, seeing an estimated 330,730 visitors for the reporting period. With its proximity to Billings and access to camping and water recreation, it was the state's second most visited park.
- Similarly, **Lake Elmo**, saw a 25.7% jump in its estimated visitation between 2020 and 2019 for the reporting period, representing approximately 206,091 visitors.
- Impacts of COVID-19 played a role at two parks in the region -- **Chief Plenty Coups** and **Pictograph Cave**. With less school field trips and group activities, these were two of nine parks across the state that experienced a decline in their estimated visitation. Visitation at Chief Plenty Coups may have been further exacerbated by travel restrictions on the Crow reservation.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at the Yellowstone River and for the Greycliff Prairie Dog Town during the months of January thru April.

Region 5 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

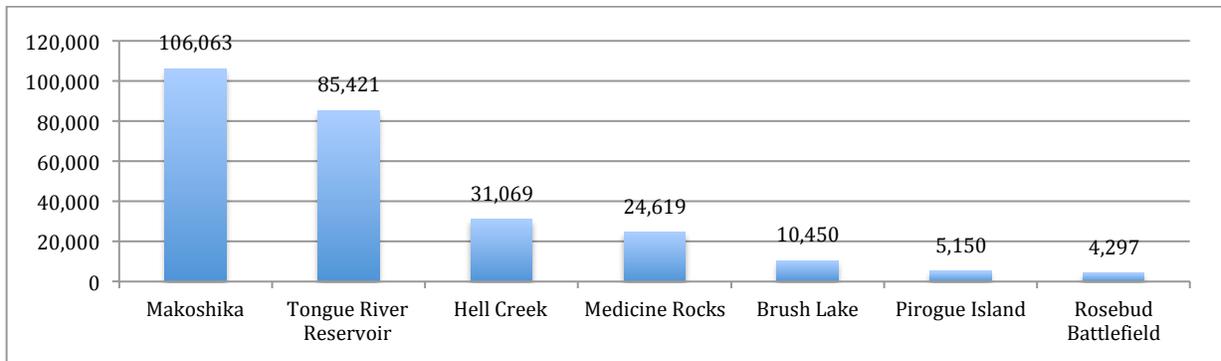
State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Cooney	262,523	330,730	26.0%
Lake Elmo	163,890	206,091	25.7%
Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	10,946	7.3%
Chief Plenty Coups	13,604	11,012	-19.1%
Pictograph Cave	48,479	38,976	-19.6%
	498,702	597,755	19.9%

REGIONS 6 and 7

Regions 6 and 7 experienced a **33.7%** increase in year to date visitation (January-September) as compared with last year. Its year to date estimated visitation represents **8.8%** of statewide visitation. Two of the state parks in these administrative regions fell into the top nine most visited parks for the state.

- **Makoshika** and **Tongue River** have been the state's eighth and ninth most visited parks in 2020, seeing an estimated 106,063 and 85,521 visitors, respectively. For Makoshika this represents an increase of 45.4% over 2019.
- **Medicine Rocks**, a park situated in a rather remote area, seemingly continues to grow in popularity, having led the region with a 68.9% increase in visitation when comparing 2020 with 2019.
- Similarly, **Pirogue Island** also saw quite a spike in visitation compared with last year, though typically its overall visitation is not as high as other parks in the region.
- **Rosebud Battlefield** was the only park in the region that experienced a decline in visitation, down approximately 1,500 visitors in 2020 compared with last year.

2020 year to date visitation (January-September)



NOTE: Visitation data is not regularly collected at Brush Lake during the months of January thru April.

Regions 6 and 7 parks sorted by greatest to least % change between 2020 and 2019

State Park	2019	2020	% Change
Medicine Rocks	14,574	24,619	68.9%
Pirogue Island	3,159	5,150	63.0%
Makoshika	72,969	106,063	45.4%
Tongue River Reservoir	63,324	85,421	34.9%
Brush Lake	8,151	10,450	28.2%
Hell Creek	31,823	31,069	-2.4%
Rosebud Battlefield	5,790	4,297	-25.8%
	199,790	267,069	33.7%

2020 Year to Date Visitation (January - September)

Parks sorted by highest total year to date visitation

REGION	PARK	YTD 2020
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	439,298
5	Cooney	330,730
4	Giant Springs	312,655
5	Lake Elmo	206,091
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	155,483
4	Spring Meadow	146,350
1	Lone Pine	111,672
6/7	Makoshika	106,063
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	85,421
2	Placid Lake	84,922
1	Whitefish	79,074
2	Frenchtown Pond	76,151
2	Salmon Lake	69,980
2	Milltown	65,773
4	Black Sandy	62,352
4	Ackley Lake	58,947
3	Missouri Headwaters	58,109
1	Les Mason	46,195
5	Pictograph Cave	38,976
2	Travelers' Rest	38,432
2	Council Grove	37,826
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	37,357
1	Logan	33,455
3	Bannack	32,377
1	Lake Mary Ronan	32,091
6/7	Hell Creek	31,069
4	Sluice Boxes	28,538
2	Beavertail Hill	27,990
6/7	Medicine Rocks	24,619
4	Tower Rock	23,862
1	Thompson Falls	19,060
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	18,665
2	Painted Rocks	16,360
3	Lost Creek	15,491
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	13,477
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	13,287
5	Chief Plenty Coups	11,012
5	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,946
6/7	Brush Lake	10,450
4	Smith River	6,248
6/7	Pirogue Island	5,150
3	Clark's Lookout	4,999
2	Fort Owen	4,310
6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	4,297

Report Notes

Visitation data is based on reported estimates from 44 of Montana's 55 state parks. In the earlier months of the year, as well as the latter months, some parks are seasonally closed. While some campgrounds opened earlier than usual due to the warm temperatures, several were then closed on/around March 21 due to the state's COVID-19 directive. Typically, however, most campgrounds do not open until May 1 with the campsite reservation season beginning on May 15. While the system does experience some off-season camping, numbers are generally low.

The system's visitation methodology and reporting practices did not substantially change between 2019 and 2020. This notwithstanding, it is noteworthy to mention that in recent months system staff members have begun undertaking a very significant look at ways to improve accuracy. In the 2020-21 seasons, Montana State Park managers and staff will be installing a set of new visitation counters to gain a better understanding of overall statewide visitation. This will fill gaps at entrances where currently there are no devices, or where there may be reliability issues with counters that are beyond their useful life. These new devices will represent an estimated increase in park entrance coverage from about 37% to 90%.

Additionally, state park staff members are also working with experts at the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) to gain assistance with revising its visitation methodology. Currently visitation data only includes estimates for visitors arriving by vehicle. Looking ahead, walk-in/bike-in visitors will be counted after this season. At several parks, there are a significant number of individuals that access the park in this manner.

Closures:

- 2019 - Smith River (January-March) and Brush Lake (January-April)
- 2020 - Smith River and Brush Lake (January-April)

No/low data reported:

- **2019** - FL-North Shore (R1), Granite Ghost Town (R3), Clark's Lookout (R3) - January-April, Beaverhead Rock (R3), Greycliff Prairie Dog Town (R5) - January-April; and, Yellowstone River (R5)
- **2020** - FL-North Shore (R1), Fish Creek (R2), Granite Ghost Town (R3), Clark's Lookout (R3) - January-April, Beaverhead Rock (R3), Greycliff Prairie Dog Town (R5) - January-April; and, Yellowstone River (R5)

For more information about Montana State Park's visitation efforts, contact Pat Doyle at pdoyle@mt.gov or at (406) 444-3818.